DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 380 992 FL 022 767

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TITLE The Power of Women's Voices in the Practice of "Chismeando."
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting for the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender (17th, Gainesville, FL, September 28-October 2, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Traits; *Females; Foreign Countries; *Interpersonal Communication; *Intonation; Language Patterns; Language Role; *Language Styles; Language Usage; *Sex Differences; Sociolinguistics; Spanish; *Story Telling
IDENTIFIERS Dominican Republic; *Gossip

ABSTRACT

The practice of "chismeando" (gossiping, in Spanish) is examined as it is defined and engaged in by a group of women from the Dominican Republic. It is argued that the stories told in chismeando are repositories of sociocultural knowledge. Women's participation in the practice provides the women with a framework for understanding and displaying this knowledge. Focus of the analysis is on the use of two intonation patterns, the phrase-final fall and the phrase-final rise, and it is shown how through varied uses of these patterns the women display and create their shared social history. The paper argues for locally sensitive interpretations of the meanings of these patterns. It is also proposed that chismeando is more than mere chat among women; it is, at least for this group of women, a site of much sociopolitical activity, their participation in which is significant to the unfolding of their everyday lives. Contains 23 references. (MSE)

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The power of women's voices in the practice of *Chismeando*

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17th Annual Conference
Organization for the Study of Communication, Language and Gender
September 28 - October 2, 1994
University of Florida, Gainesville

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The power of women's voices in the practice of *Chismeando*

Abstract

In this paper I examine the practice of chismeando 'gossiping' as defined and engaged in by a group of women from the Dominican Republic. I argue that the stories told in chismeando are repositories of sociocultural knowledge. Their participation in the practice provides the women with a framework for understanding and displaying this knowledge. I focus in particular on their uses of two specific intonation patterns, the phrase-final fall and the phrase-final rise[1], and show how through their varied uses of these patterns the women display and create their shared social history. In doing so I argue for locally sensitive interpretations of the meanings of these patterns. More significantly, I argue that chismeando is more than an activity of mere chat among women. It is, at least for this group of women, a site of much sociopolitical activity, their participation in which is significant to the unfolding of their everyday lives.

Introduction

"True life is not lived where great external changes take place -
where people move about, clash, fight and slay one another -
it is lived only where these tiny, tiny infinitesimally small changes occur"
Leo Tolstoy

While everyday face-to-face interactive practices appear to be, perhaps because of their ubiquity, rather ordinary and uneventful, studies of such practices (e.g., Goodwin, 1992; Hall, 1993b) have shown them to be constitutive of a mutually shaping, locally situated struggle between the sociocultural forces embedded in their linguistic and paralinguistic elements and the individual participants. There has also been in recent years a focused interest in the examination of the power embedded in the control and/or manipulation of the linguistic and paralinguistic elements of oral practices (see for example, Goodwin, 1992 and Hall 1993b) as well as a parallel interest in looking at how larger sociopolitical and sociohistorical processes are constituted in everyday talk.

This study I report upon here is part of these larger research interests. My primary intent is to show that the practice of chismeando[2] as defined and engaged in by a group of women from the Dominican Republic is a socially important activity. I argue that in this practice, the women collectively remember and create sociocultural knowledge that is important to the living of their daily lives. I examine in particular the ways in which these women use two different intonation patterns to foreground and create chisme 'gossip'. I argue that the uses of the formulae, which on one level may seem inconsequential, are important sociopolitical acts by which the women actively constitute and/or maintain the social rules by which they live their lives. I argue further that these empirical data challenge any claim to a universal meaning of these paralinguistic conventions, arguing instead that meanings of these (and other interactive) patterns emerge from the dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986; Morson & Emerson, 1990) obtaining between the larger sociohistorical forces embedded in the practice and their contextually situated uses by particular groups of people and individuals in those groups.

In what follows I first briefly summarize the notion of interactive practice as it is used here and the research on the nature of gossiping as a social practice. This is followed by a short description of the practice and the group of women participants. I then examine the sociocultural knowledge embedded in the stories told and the uses of two intonation patterns in the storytelling. Finally, I discuss these moments and the practice itself both in terms of its importance to this group of women and of the larger issues of sociopolitics and situated action, and suggest areas for further study.

The Nature of Interactive Practices

Interactive practices are socioculturally constituted face-to-face interactions which are mediated by interactionally-activated, sociohistorically-developed resources (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). These resources are linguistically and paralinguistically instantiated, constituted by and constituting socioculturally constructed goals and used by members of a group to collectively create, maintain and modify

their history. Communicating meaning in an interactive practice depends upon the group members' shared understanding of the conventional, i.e., historical, ways in which the resources get used. It is this conventionality that binds the participants to some degree to particular ways of realizing and/or modifying their collective history. The actual meaning of these conventions, however, emerges from the ways in which they are used at any particular moment of time by a particular group of people. Bakhtin's (1986; Morson & Emerson, 1990) notion of dialogicality captures the tension that exists at any moment in a practice between the sociohistorical, conventionalized nature of the linguistic and paralinguistic resources, and the locally situated, emergent uses of these resources during the practice itself. It is the simultaneous attention to these elements and their uses that can reveal the myriad ways groups formulate voices in relation to larger social forces (Gal, 1989:360).

Gossiping as a social practice

The study of 'gossiping' has generated a great deal of scholarly interest in a variety of disciplines (e.g., Brenneis, 1984; Coates, 1989; Connerton, 1989; Eckert, 1990; Eder & Enke, 1991; Gluckman, 1963; Goodwin, 1992; Hall, 1993a, 1993b; Hannerz, 1967; Haviland, 1977). In these studies the content of the practice has been defined as a certain kind of talk about a socially unacceptable act that happened to or was instigated by a person who is not present at the time of the talk or is acted toward as if she were absent, i.e., she is talked about in the third person. It has been argued that the primary function of the practice is to serve as a forum for the display of social control within which group members, by talking about others, are able to exert collective power over each other and keep each other's social behavior in check. The research has also made clear its pancultural importance as a sociocultural practice by which members of a culture group, in the process of posing and responding to social dilemmas in which both the characters and events are real, develop, display and sustain their sociocultural competence.

The study presented here bears out this research, and takes it a step further by demonstrating 1) the kind of information that is contained in the stories and its social significance to these women, and 2)the situated, dynamic nature of these processes, i.e. how the (re)creation of significant sociocultural knowledge is interactionally realized.

Chismeando

Sociocultural Context and Participants

The data which form the basis of this study are part of a larger audio-taped data set I collected in the town of San Cristóbal, Dominican Republic during a three-month stay in 1989[3]. The Dominican Republic is a Spanish-speaking country, and shares the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean with the country of Haiti. San Cristóbal is the capital of the province of the same name and lies about 28 kilometers to the southwest of Santo Domingo, the capital of the country.

The country is underdeveloped and about 75% of its population, is constituted by the lower-middle and working classes of which the predominant race is mulatto (Wiarda and Kryzanek, 1992)[4]. The participants of this study as well as the majority of the population of the town of San Cristóbal were mulatto and members of the lower-middle and working classes at the time of the study.

The women whose practice forms the basis of this study ranged in age from about 13 to 22. At the time of the study, most of the women attended school, either during the day or at night, and a few had jobs as house or laundry maids in the homes of the middle and upper middle classes located closer to the center of town. A few of them studied English at one of the several English language institutes located around town. Most hoped to marry and remain in San Cristóbal, although a few had aspirations to go to the United States to live and work. Only one of them, the oldest, was married. She had two children and was married to the brother of one of the other participants.

According to the women, there were two criteria for deciding with whom one could engage in chismeando. Only those with whom one had *confianza* 'trust' and among whom social power was perceived to be more

or less equal were potential co-participants. Relevant components of the women's establishment and maintenance of confianza included similarity and proximity of living conditions and a shared understanding of the social rules against which the reported displays of improper behavior were evaluated. These women all lived in the same barrio and considered themselves good friends among whom existed a high level of confianza[5]. Age and gender did not seem to be a strong factor in deciding with whom one could share confianza. As indicated earlier, the ages of the women spanned 9 years, and although the practice reported upon here was engaged in entirely by women, no one considered chismeando to be solely a woman's activity.

Sociocultural Knowledge Constructed in Chismeando

What I present here is an overview of the sociocultural knowledge embedded in the chismeando stories told by the women. As I argued earlier, such an examination provides a window into the sociocultural knowledge these women considered important to the living of their daily lives as members of their community.

All talk considered by the women to be chisme concerned some questionable social behavior of another person who was either not present during the interaction, acted towards as if she or he were not present, or of people passing by the group while they were engaged in chismeando. The behavior talked about did not have to actually occur; rather, it at least had to be a possible occurrence.

The formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships both with men and with each other were the primary focus of the stories. There were three most frequently gossiped-about behaviors: women being in particular places where and/or when they shouldn't be with men, women wearing borrowed items such as shoes and items of clothing around town and damaging them, and women acting "stuck up', i.e., seeming to be unwilling to talk with the other members of the community. Other less frequent topics included those about unmarried women who had gotten pregnant, couples who had gotten into fights, and boyfriends who flirted with other women.

In all stories told, the women were always referred to by name and were all members of the same barrio where these women lived. The most frequently mentioned women were members of their group. Interestingly, when men featured as characters in the stories, they remained anonymous, being referred to, instead, as *un muchacho* 'a boy' or *el/ese novio* 'the/that boyfriend.' The naming of specific men in chismeando was not necessary to the telling or creating of scandal. Instead, it was the naming of women and the suggestion of some kind of association with a (any) man either at a time that was inappropriate or in an inappropriate place that was considered improper and thus worthy of being talked about.

The places used as settings in these stories were of two kinds: those suggested to be improper because of the time of the meeting, at night, and those considered to be improper because of the kind of place it was. Some of the specific places mentioned in the stories in which women were said to have been seen with un muchacho at night and thus used to suggest socially improper behavior included "down by the river" "on the corner by Ramoncito's" and "at the beach." The women stated that these places, by themselves, were not considered inappropriate places for women to be. Rather it was women being in them, or suggested to be in them, with men at inappropriate times that was considered scandalous.

Two particular places mentioned are of special interest as they were frequently cited in the stories and when mentioned generated heightened audience reaction. One such place was the town of Hatillo. Hatillo is a small town about 12 kilometers outside of San Cristóbal, and the site of field headquarters for a number of government engineering projects. This distinction brought to the town an increased population of construction workers of national and international origin, and as such, Hatillo had built up quite a reputation among the town members as a place with wild and corrupt ways. Another place that was socially important in the making of scandal and often used as a setting of scandalous stories was the Bar Dorado located in the center of San Cristóbal.

Excerpt 1 is an example of the use of the place to suggest a display of improper behavior by one of the members of the group. According to this story, Susana, a girl about whom much chisme occurred, was said to have been seen sitting in Dorado, a place that was considered by the townspeople to be filled with *tigres* 'tigers' [men of ill-repute] and loose women, and certainly not a place for a proper Dominican woman to be. By suggesting that Susana was seen there, the teller of the story implies that Susana was engaged in some kind of scandalous behavior with the boys at the bar. The frequency with which these places were mentioned in chismeando and the heightened responses their naming called forth clearly indicates their social importance in the lives of these women.

Excerpt 1[6]

1. Mari: bueno Lola a mi no me gusta el chisme pero tú no sabes que
2. Susana anoche andaba por ahí, muchacha, y esa muchacha
3. estaba=
4. Lola: =quién=
5. Mari: =o Susana=
6. Lola: =↑có::[↓ mo
7. Otra: [Su [↑sa::na
8. Mari: [[(digo yo) Justina y Susana estaban en la
9. iglesia y fui a la iglesia en la iglesia qué yo la estaba
10. buscando para que fuéramos a la heladería y cuando yo
11. pasé por Dorado estaba Susana sentada en ↑Do:ra::↓do=
12. Lola: =↑o::: [↓o::
13. Otras: [↑a:::↓y::
14. [↑có:::↓mo::=
15. Arlene: =para que ↑tú ve:↓a para que ↑tú ve:↓a

1. Mari: well Lola I don't like gossip but don't you know that
2. Susana last night was walking around, girl, and that girl
3. was=
4. Lola: =who=
5. Mari: =oh Susana=
6. Lola: =↑wha::[↓:t
7. Other: [Su[↑sa::na
8. Mari: [[(I say) Justina and Susana were at
9. church and I went to the church in the church what I was
10. looking for her so we could go to the ice cream shop and when I
11. passed by Dorado there was Susana sitting in ↑Do:ra::↓do=
12. Lola: =↑o::: [↓o::
13. Others: [[↑o:::↓o::h
14. [↑wha:::↓::t=
15. Arlene: =so that ↑you'd see:↓her so that ↑you'd see:↓her

I ought to point out that prior to engaging in the larger study of chismeando I was quite unaware of the scandal that was associated with either the town or the bar. I had known of Hatillo for quite some time as the central site of a variety of government-sponsored construction projects. It is only by virtue of its importance in the various plots of the chisme stories that I was made aware of its reputation. Similarly, I was quite unaware of the scandal that the townspeople associated with the bar Dorado despite the fact that it was located quite close to where I lived and I frequently passed by it on my way to someplace else. To me it seemed just another potential stopping place for a cool drink on a hot day. It was only through chismeando that I was able to learn about the social significance of these sites.

Coger prestado 'borrowing items' was an important and frequently-engaged-in social activity by all members of the town and as such was an activity about which there was much potential for socially inappropriate behavior, making it a frequent topic in chismeando. Excerpt 2 is about one such incident. In this story, as in many others, *coger prestado* is treated as an important and serious social activity, as it was one way that these women worked creatively with their low economic resources to obtain clothing items and accessories considered to be luxuries. Each invested in a few items, which they then treated as 'community resources' by lending these items to each other. Thus, taking good care of items borrowed and appropriately responding to improper treatment given to one's belongings were important social rules for these women in the evaluation of their own and others' behaviors.

In the following story the fact that a woman had damaged a borrowed dress and still wore it 'modeling' around town for others to see is offered and responded to as a socially inappropriate act.

Excerpt 2

1. Arlene: ay pero ven acá ustedes no saben la última=
2. Mari: =cúal es la última
3. Arlene: viene Aidé ayer=
4. Lola: =Aidé ayer aquí la de allí [de la esquina
5. Arlene: [modela↑:[ndo
6. Mari:: [la ↑hija ne↓gra=
7. Arlene: =sí sí con el vestido azul que yo le presté ↑modelan↓do
8. Morena: y te lo rompió
9. Arlene: y yo me quedé callada

1. Arlene: oh but come here you don't know the latest=
2. Mari: =what's the latest
3. Arlene: Aidé comes yesterday=
4. Lola: Aidé yesterday here the one from over there [from the corner
5. Arlene: [model↑::[ing
6. Mari: [↑the black gi↓rl
7. Arlene: =yeah yeah with the blue dress that I lent her ↑model↓ing
8. Morena: and she tore it on you
9. Arlene: and I kept quiet

In the chismeando stories there is much to be learned about what was valued in a man. That men quite often had multiple concurrent relationships with women seemed an accepted fact; that men supported their families in some way and did not inflict physical violence on the women or children are behaviors that were more salient and used by the women to evaluate whether a socially inappropriate act was possible or probable on the part of the man in question. Excerpt 3 is an example of how the possibility of socially improper behavior by one man was brought forth for discussion and evaluated by the women as he passed by their group. The fact that he brought home some of his wages to his mother and siblings was evaluated quite positively by the group and used to dissuade others from providing chisme about him. Mari, in fact, tells the others twice to 'shut up' since he is 'the best boy'.

Excerpt 3

1. Mari: ay espérate ahí viene Ramón peleando por Arlene
2. Lola: es muy chévere ese muchacho el mejor muchacho es Ramón=
3. Mari: =cállense que ahí viene Ramón el mejor muchacho
4. es Ramón es un muchacho muy serio cállense
5. que ahí viene Ramón [el mejor muchacho
6. Lola: [cuando cobra lleva cuarto a su casa
7. le da cuarto a su mamá y a sus hermanos=
8. Mari: =él es muy bueno

1. Mari: oh wait, here comes Ramón fighting for Arlene
2. Lola: he's great that boy the best boy is Ramón=
3. Mari: =shut up 'cause here comes Ramón the best boy
4. is Ramón he is a very serious boy shut up
5. 'cause here comes Ramón[the best boy
6. Lola: [when he gets money he brings some to his hous
7. he give some to his mother and to his siblings=
8. Mari: =he is very good

A last point important aspect of the social lives of these women as displayed and created in the practice of chismeando is the role that the concept of religion played. It was quite often used as a criterion

for deciding whether someone could be the subject of chisme and whether the inappropriate behavior said to be displayed by someone was actually possible. In Excerpt 4, Mari uses the concept of religion to allay Lola's fears that she might figure as a protagonist in one of the chismeando stories. Mari uses the fact that Lola went to church to explain why the others would not consider her as a potential story character.

Excerpt 4

1. Mari: ay Lola no hablando de ti que tú eres muy seria
2. que tú vas a la iglesia no de ti no se puede hablar

1. Mari: oh Lola not speaking about you 'cause you are very serious
2. 'cause you go to church no you can't be talked about

In sum, the stories told in chismeando are concerned with far more than idle chatter. They are the threads with which the women continually weave a sociocultural mosaic of their everyday lives and as such make apparent the social issues with which the women are most concerned. That is to say, they make visible the sociocultural knowledge, rules and customs that these women consider important to the living of their everyday lives and by which they judge and are judged as community members. More specifically, the stories reveal the people, places, activities, and the norms concerned with the building and maintaining of interpersonal relationships that are significant to these women as they go about the business of living their daily lives.

(Re)Creating Chisme

Of primary importance in the unfolding of chismeando and what is explored in more detail here is the varied use of two intonation patterns, the phrase-final fall and the phrase-final rise, by the women to bring forth the most significant part of the chisme story, the alleged improprietous act. What distinguishes the use of the two is not determined by what follows their uses, as the responses to both types of utterances were the same. i.e., both engendered exclamations of incredulity etc. Rather, it is the type of text, related versus created chisme, by which the distinction is made. In other words, when the

socially inappropriate act is clearly expressed in the lexicogrammatical content of the utterance, the utterance falls at the end. At these moments it seems to be taken for granted by the storyteller that the impropriety is clearly expressed in what was said, and the falling intonation alerts the others to attend to the propositional content of the statement. Excerpt 5 contains examples of these utterances.

Excerpt 5

1. tiene como ↑cinco no::↓vios
2. estaba Susana sentada en ↑Do:ra::↓do
3. esta mañana ( ) a mi y a Arlene dizque que que ella va para ↑Ha:ti::↓llo

1. she has like ↑five bo::y↓friends
2. there was Susana sitting in ↑Do:ra::↓do
3. this morning ( ) to me and Arlene it's said that that she's going to ↑Ha:ti::↓llo

The claim that a girl has five boyfriends, as in Line 1 of Excerpt 5, for instance, seemed to be a taken-for-granted impropriety in the lives of these women, and therefore was intonationally expressed as a phrase-final fall. That is, the falling intonation alerted the listeners to attend to the propositional content of the utterance as it made explicit the social behavior that was being judged. Line 2 is taken from the longer Excerpt 1 (Line 11) and occurred as the climax of the story told by Mari about Susana. As mentioned earlier, that the Bar Dorado and the town Hatillo are places of ill-repute was common knowledge to the townspeople of San Cristóbal and the mere mention of their names as sites of particular behaviors made explicit the impropriety of the act committed, i.e., being in these places. It is this pattern, the phrase-final fall, that was used to present chisme, i.e., to bring forth and open for discussion, statements about improper displays of social behavior by certain community members. The impropriety was commonly known and agreed upon among the women and contained in the propositional content of the utterance.

In the second intonation pattern used to present a claim of inappropriately displayed behavior the utterances ended on the rise. In these utterances fewer, or no, details about the alleged behavior were given. It was, instead, the phrase-final rise of the utterance that implied an improper display of some behavior which if performed by someone else or in some other place or time might not have been considered improper. Four examples of utterances ending on the rise are included in Excerpt 6. In each of these utterances what was said does not indicate a particularly improper behavior and what preceded and followed each of these does not clarify the impropriety. The fact, for example, that Madelín was seen on a street corner with a boy was not, in itself, improper behavior. However, by ending the utterance on the rise the storyteller created the possibility of impropriety and intended for the other participants to interpret it as such, which in all cases they did, by responding with exclamations of surprise (*ay*) or incredulity (*cómo*). It seems then that the use of rising intonation engendered suspicion of scandalous behavior. i.e., what was said was to be interpreted as improperly displayed social behavior by the character in question. It was the use of this pattern by which women created chisme from otherwise unremarkable displays of social activity.

Excerpt 6

1. yo ví a Madelín anoche en la esquina ahí donde Ramoncito con un mu↑cha::cho
2. que dejó el novio por ↑aquí::
3. tenía un panta↑ló::n
4. que era en la parcela que estaba a las horas de la noche con un mu↑cha:cho

1. I saw Madelín last night on the corner by Ramoncito's with a ↑bo::y
2. that she left her boyfriend ↑he::re
3. she had on a pair of ↑pa::nts
4. it was in the field that she was at night with a ↑bo:y

I suggest here that the knowledge and use of these two patterns constitute two strategies of sociopolitical economy (Gal, 1989) for these women. The use of the first pattern, the phrase-final fall, by a

storyteller signaled to the other women that what was contained in the propositional content of the utterance was to be interpreted as explicit displays of improper behavior. By bringing forth and evaluating stories about others' behaviors in this way the women foregrounded important social issues, set themselves apart from these issues, and were thus able to peer into, reflect upon and deal with, in some small but significant ways, the social conditions by which they lived their lives. By using this particular pattern in the telling of chisme stories the women, either as storyteller or respondent to the stories, displayed the sociocultural knowledge that was necessary to maintaining their status as bona fide members of the group, and at the same time made visible their individual stances toward the larger social world in which they lived, i.e., made visible the social issues that were important to them in the shaping of theirs and the others' social lives.

The knowledge and use of the second intonation pattern, the phrase-final rise, is also a significant interactive strategy and one that is potentially more powerful than the first in that by ending utterances on the rise the women were able to create chisme from social moments that could otherwise be viewed as harmless. Through the use of this pattern the women actively engendered skepticism about a particular person's social behavior, and thus had the potential to transform any social act into an impropriety and any community member into a perpetrator of scandalous behavior. One would not have had to break a social rule to be made a story character in chismeando as any social act or person could be made to seem improper just by virtue of the rising intonation.

I suggest that the use of the rising intonation pattern in creating chisme is a powerful strategy available to these women for changing the course of theirs and others' lives. On the one hand, this power to transform others into perpetrators of impropriety by naming them as characters in unspecified displays of impropriety functions to set up a frame of expectations that facilitates similar interpretations about them and, as a consequence, raises questions about their social reputations. That is to say, it casts a web of suspicion about their status as socially proper community members. And, although I have not

explored here the networks of social relationships of those who figure as characters in these moments of chisme, their being made characters in these moments at the very least foregrounds -- and makes questionable -- their status in the larger community and thus provides direction for such study. Furthermore, at the same time that the women, via their use of the phrase-final rise, create a kind of social visibility for some community members, I suggest that there exists the potential for the women to control the use of this pattern in such a way so as not to be invoked as a character of chisme. i.e., to render themselves invisible, and thus help them to create and maintain positions of relatively high status within their group. Further study is, of course, needed to substantiate this claim (although see Hall 1993b, for a study examining an individual's control and manipulation of some of the conventions of chismeando in such a way as to positively affect her status in the group).

There is one more point that needs to be made about the importance of the two patterns of interest here. Specifically, their roles as powerful tools in the (re)construction of the social lives of these women in chismeando challenge any claim to some universal meaning residing in the patterns themselves. They challenge in particular the claims made by Lakoff (1975) and Bolinger (1989), for example, that the use of the rising intonation pattern is a universal index of uncertainty, hesitation, tentativeness and indecisiveness, its use marking some psychological weakness in the user. This is clearly not the case here. As demonstrated above, the use of the rising intonation is a strategy which does not reflect a level of self-doubt residing in the user about what is being said but actively and forcefully <u>engenders</u> uncertainty, or even more seriously, scepticism in the minds of the other women about the degree and kind of social propriety residing in the behaviors of particular community members. There is clearly no hesitation or tentativeness on the part of those using this strategy in creating chisme. Rather, as I have argued above, its use creates a level of social power in the hands of the user that can serve to help maintain or modify both her status and that of the person being presented as a character in a chisme story. At the very least the

women's uses of these two patterns reveal the significance of context in the interpretation and construction of meaning of these and other linguistic and paralinguistic resources used in interactive practices.

Conclusions

I have demonstrated that the practice of chismeando is an important one in the lives of these women by showing 1)the significant sociocultural information that is contained in the stories told and 2)how they use two prosodic conventions to both display and create important sociocultural knowledge in the evaluation of the social behavior of others.

I suggest that this study is significant in the following ways. First, it provides us with an understanding of the important role that the practice of chismeando plays in the building of intragroup support among these women by making visible what they, collectively, consider to be important sociocultural knowledge. By participating in the display and creation of such knowledge the women continually solidify their allegiance to each other as social group members. In addition to its intragroup importance, the practice of chismeando can play an important role for those who are not members of the group but aspire to be, e.g., learners of another language. Because there is significant sociocultural knowledge embedded within the stories -- knowledge that is for the most part difficult to locate elsewhere -- by engaging as audience to the practice, outgroup members can develop some of the sociocultural competence needed to become a legitimate member of the group or at the very least come to understand what it means to be a legitimate member of the group.

Second, I have argued that a degree of sociopolitical power is embedded in the competent uses of these two seemingly insignificant paralinguistic conventions. Hymes (1974:54) pointed out that "the more a way of speaking has become shared and meaningful within a group, the more likely that crucial cues will be efficient, i.e., slight in scale." Such is the case examined here. And although these cues used by the women may seem on one level unremarkable, the potential for power embedded in their use clearly makes competent engagement in the practice

of chismeando of some political importance to the successful accomplishment of their everyday lives. That is, knowing how to both display and create social rules and knowledge are skills useful to the evaluation of one's own and others behavior in ways that help to maintain the social group and one's status within it.

The study also demonstrates how the meanings of two particular intonation patterns, the phrase-final rise and the phrase-final fall, are tied to their uses in locally-situated sociocultural activities, calling into question any universal claims to their meanings. It thus provides empirical support for Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) statement that such strategies can only be interpreted and evaluated in the contexts of their uses. It also provides evidence of an important sociopolitical activity in which powerful linguistic behaviors are used by women. By relating and creating scandal about others, these women make problematic two perspectives: that gossiping is mere solidarity-building 'idle talk' (Holmes, 1993), and that there are generic and universal 'female' ways of interacting which include behaviors that are more cooperative, less aggressive and confrontational. The evidence presented here suggests otherwise and points to the need for a more situated, contextual study of language use in which such dimensions as the relationships among the participants, their social identities and roles played, and the social goal(s) brought to and negotiated in the interaction are taken into account.

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[1]These patterns are similar to what Bolinger (1989:3-4) calls, respectively, Profile A, whose distinguishing feature is an abrupt fall from the highlighted syllable, and Profile B in which there is first a jump up to the accented syllable and then a continuous gradual rise.

[2]*Chismeando* is used here even though the substantive *chismear* may seem a more grammatically correct choice as it was the word used by the women to describe what they were doing.

[3]The data of concern here is comprised of 55 minutes of audiotaped interaction. I was assisted in the transcription and analysis by a local townsperson and member of the women's barrio, the woman with whom I lived, who resided closer to the center of town, and the women themselves. Also included as secondary data sources are sets of semi-structured interviews conducted with the women and a number of townspeople during the 3-month period in 1989 and in a follow-up visit in 1990.

[4]The other 25% is white and/or hispanic (15%) and black (10%).

[5]I had known these women for about 2 months, living among and interacting with them daily, joining in some of the chismeando sessions as audience to the practice, and building a level of confianza before I asked to record them. They considered me to be a friend and confidante. I should note the fact that my status as an American, and one who could potentially provide help of some kind in the future, may have contributed to their including me in their group as much as my living among them and establishing confianza did.

[6]Pseudonyms are used for all participants, both as tellers of the stories and characters within them. Transcription conventions include: [to indicate overlapping talk; : to indicate vowel elongation; = to indicate connected talk, i.e. no pause between the utterances; () to

indicate incomprehensible talk; ↑ and ↓ to indicate rising and falling intonation, respectively. The English translation follows each excerpt.